

Waiting games are not fun

Aussie theme parks miss the mark compared with the world's best, writes Tara Wells

Riddle me this: if 132 people are lined up ahead of you for a ride that has a capacity of 16 guests (although seats are often left empty) and it takes five minutes between turns, plus an extra 50 seconds for the ride itself, how long is it before you get to the front?

Theme parks are either wholesome family fun or an excruciating day of queueing. The world's best amusement parks know this and make lining up less eye-stabbingly awful. The world's less-best don't. After recent visits to Dreamworld, its sister park WhiteWater World, and Sydney's Raging Waters – along with a chorus of online complaints about Warner Bros Movie World – it's clear Australia falls dismally into the latter. "What do you expect? Don't go in peak times!" came the online retorts.

I timed my family's Dreamworld visit for when NSW schools were on holidays but Queensland's had gone back. It should have worked. We picked rides with visibly small queues and congratulated ourselves when we had no switchbacks in a line designed for zig-zagging. Yet still we waited. And waited.

In Disneyland, there are only peak times and peak-er times. My family visited in a week of historically lower visitation yet still managed a day when the park reached capacity. My "Happiest Day on Earth" was shared with around 84,999 other visitors (Disney doesn't release official visitor statistics). Did I wait in line? Oh boy, yes. Do I ever want to hear the chirpy "Yo soy Bird!" from Autopia's looping safety spiel ever again? Absolutely not. But my day was not defined by queueing.

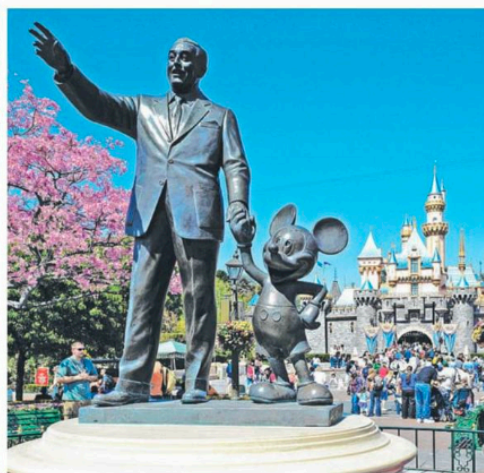
Disneyland's app shows expected wait times per ride so visitors can use their time more efficiently. I recommend the "Lightning Lane Multi Pass" feature ("Genie+" at the time of my visit). It costs extra but pays off. While we queued in one line – or caught a show, or ate, or felt the full force of the price of light sabres – we were in a second virtual queue for another ride.

About 17 million people visit Disneyland each year for its 35 attractions. More than a million people visit Dreamworld annually for its 22 attractions. With these ratios, Australia's theme park visitors should be laughing all the way to the front of the line.

It's some comfort to see Dreamworld's staff being painstaking with safety procedures. They double-check gates, ensure everyone's out before new riders are let in, and sign a clipboard of (presumably) procedural checks. Nearly a decade after four people died due to safety



Above: Dreamworld, Gold Coast. Left: Tara Wells and family at Disneyland, California, and its Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse statue.



failures, stricter safeguards are welcome. But there needs to be a better balance of risk management with efficiency. Start by putting on more staff. By more, I mean one. Just one more team member per ride would drastically cut turnaround times. Then train them to focus on speed and efficiency. Taking your sweet time doesn't make for a safer environment; being thorough does. Finally, improve accuracy and communication about expected wait times.

Thankfully, change is afoot. Last December's opening of Dreamworld's new rollercoaster,

Jungle Rush, shows an awareness that the visitor experience starts in the line. Like Disneyland's Indiana Jones Adventure, it has theming and storytelling in the air-conditioned queue area. Expect the revamped Claw ride – reopening as King Claw later this year – to have more of the same. This goes a long way in reducing perceived (if not actual) wait times.

If waiting more than an hour for a ride that's over in seconds is more misery than pleasure, how can amusement parks expect to survive? Riddle me that.